Music

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Little Brother's Pat "9th Wonder" Douthit was seemingly everywhere this year, including the upper reaches of the charts (he produced a song on G-Unit rapper Lloyd Banks' new album, which hit No. 3 on the Billboard album charts). This might be the best of his 2006 output, a perfect pairing of Murs' sprawling run-on rhymes and 9th Wonder's slick old-school beats.

Subtitled "Re-Working the North Carolina Jukebox," this fundraiser for the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation consists of North Carolina acts covering North Carolina songs. Tift Merritt, Superchunk, Squirrel Nut Zippers, the dB's and Let's Active all figure prominently, and producer John Plymale's liner notes explain how the project's multiple generations fit together. An album made with much love, and it shows.

FULL TEXT

Nov. 26--This has been one of the best years in recent memory for local music, with a wave of excellent and accessible albums emerging from our own backyard. Make a hit with people on your list with these releases:

ANNUALS, "BE HE ME" (ACE FU).

The Triangle's hip national breakthrough act has earned worldwide raves, clicking with people who are impatient for the next Arcade Fire album to emerge. "Be He Me" is excellent left-field pop, heavy on the swelling, majestic drama.

ERIC BACHMANN, "TO THE RACES" (SADDLE CREEK).

This pensive, folksy solo album seems decidedly out of character for Bachmann, who is better known for screamin' indie-rock with Chapel Hill's Archers of Loaf and Neil Diamond-style pop with Crooked Fingers. "To the Races" finds Bachmann slipping into the role of Tar Heel troubadour -- he recorded the album in a motel room on the Outer Banks, and the best song on it is called "Carr-boro Woman."

"HOTEL LIGHTS" (BAR/NONE).

It's a mystery why this self-titled collection of wonderfully understated, atmospheric pop (which finally got a proper nationwide release this year) wasn't a gigantic hit. At least it picked up exposure on ABC's "Grey's Anatomy" with the song "Follow Through" serving as closing montage music for an episode in April.

BRANFORD MARSALIS, "BRAGGTOWN" (MARSALIS/ROUNDER).

Durham resident Marsalis embraces his

new hometown more than ever. "Braggtown" was titled after a working-class district in the city and recorded at St. Joseph's Performance Hall, and the cover photo was shot in the locker room of the Durham Bulls baseball stadium. The music takes its cues from Hamlet native John Coltrane, with long, expansive tracks that allow the band to stretch out and blow.

("Braggtown" also appears on jazz writer Owen Cordle's list, as does another North Carolina artist's release: Elmer Gibson's "The Reach of Memory.")

THE OLD CEREMONY, "OUR ONE MISTAKE" (SONABLAST).

Arty name aside (it's a nod to singer/poet Leonard Cohen), the Old Ceremony plays pure pop that ought to thrill anybody with a liking for Ben Folds. Were commercial radio not a lost cause, "Talk Straight" and "Papers in Order" would be all over the airwaves.

ROMAN CANDLE, "THE WEE HOURS REVUE" (V2).

After years of label limbo, Roman Candle re-emerged with a new and improved version of its 2002 debut. As produced by Chris Stamey, this is high-gloss, detailed pop with a pulsing groove. Yet another excellent record that is just a radio hit away from being enormous.

TRES CHICAS, "BLOOM, RED & THE ORDINARY GIRL" (YEP ROC).

The formerly rural-sounding chicas go uptown on this collaboration with veteran British session musicians. The result is poppy blue-eyed soul of a piece with the late great Dusty Springfield.

MURS AND 9TH WONDER, "MURRAY'S REVENGE" (RECORD COLLECTION).

Little Brother's Pat "9th Wonder" Douthit was seemingly everywhere this year, including the upper reaches of the charts (he produced a song on G-Unit rapper Lloyd Banks' new album, which hit No. 3 on the Billboard album charts). This might be the best of his 2006 output, a perfect pairing of Murs' sprawling run-on rhymes and 9th Wonder's slick old-school beats.

KATHARINE WHALEN, "DIRTY LITTLE SECRET" (M.C.).

The former Squirrel Nut Zippers singer/banjo player as you've never heard her. There's not a lick of banjo on "Dirty Little Secret," which is atmospheric, sharply rendered dance-pop along the lines of Sade. Unexpected, and very cool.

VARIOUS, "SONGS FOR SIXTY-FIVE ROSES" (www.songsforsixtyfiveroses.com).

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